

## **Oct 6          All are of Worth**

Ruth 1:1-10

One of my favorite books of the Old Testament is Ruth. It is one of only two books in our entire Bible that are named for women. Many biblical scholars think that we should read Ruth, not so much as history, but as a living parable. Parables always have a twist that challenge people's assumptions.

When Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, he knew the implications involved in making the hero of the story a Samaritan. The parable would not have made its point if most of the people in the audience had not considered themselves morally superior to Samaritans. We may not realize it but the same thing is true in this story. We will examine what the first people to hear Ruth thought about Moabites and about marrying foreigners. Ruth makes us ask, "What are the things or who are the people we despise until we are forced to turn to them in times of crisis?"

As we begin this story of Ruth it is filled with a series of small ironies. Famine covers the area around Bethlehem. Bethlehem means "House of Bread." It was one of the more fertile areas near Jerusalem. Elimelech's family moves to Moab in order to live but ends up dying leaving no fruit, children, behind them.

The family is said to be Ephrathites which seem to be the name of a clan. First Chronicles suggest that Bethlehem was founded by the descendants of a woman named Ephrath, the wife of Caleb, one of the two faithful spies who first entered the promised land after the people of Israel left Egypt. He, along with Joshua, believed that God would be with the people of Israel if they went forward. The other ten spies tell tales of giants and scare the people. Their stories cause the people to turn away and wander for 40 years in the desert. I think it is particularly appropriate for a story that centers around a woman to identify her family by the name of the clan's matriarch instead of Caleb the patriarch.

We need to understand that the term Moab would have carried negative moral and emotional connotations for the people who first heard Ruth. Relations with Moab were never good. Deuteronomy bans Moabites and their descendants down to the tenth

generation from entering the assembly of the Lord. In the Hebrew Bible, Moab is known as a place of evil. Indeed Elimelech and his family will only find suffering and death there. He fled famine, one form of darkness, into another darkness. So they were well disposed to think that nothing good would ever come from Moab.

Most scholars believe that the book of Ruth was first written down after the people returned from exile in Babylon. We know that Ezra and Nehemiah had been trying to persuade the Jews to abandon their foreign wives. So, this story is a counterpoint to this message as well.

Our story begins in Moab, a place of wickedness and misery, with two sons doing the unthinkable and marrying foreign wives. The listeners would have assumed that they died childless because they had done such a despicable thing. Like parables in general, Ruth begins in a way that encourages people to identify themselves with the characters and their attitudes. But, like all parables, the story of Ruth will eventually subvert or cause the audience to question their initial assumptions.

*God is with us in the dark times.* The story begins with nothing but misery for the family of Elimelech. Famine, forced relocation, and death. Naomi's world has been crushed and turned to dust. The old rabbinic interpretations expand on this story. It says that Elimelech was wealthy and everywhere Naomi went she was carried, wearing fine clothes, and the food at her table was the best. Her name suited her, for it meant pleasant. When she returns to Bethlehem, she is walking, sunken cheeks from hunger and wearing tattered rags. This is why she says she has a new name, Mara which means bitterness. Yet, we know God is with her in her darkest hours. Part of the story of Ruth is how God's blessings come from unexpected people and places. It is a call to trust when life is hard.

*We let prejudicial assumptions keep us from seeing the good in people.* This is the theme at the beginning of the book. We are going to see that Ruth, a foreign wife from a cursed place, Moab, was a person of kindness, love and faith. Her story challenged the first listeners about their opinions concerning the people of Moab and many scholars think it was shared, in part, to attack the harsh stories of Ezra and

Nehemiah. She makes us realize that just because a person is different does not mean they are not good, can't be faithful and they end up being a blessing.

This story makes me pause. When conflicts of opinion arise in our own communities of faith concerning who is acceptable and who is not, we can encourage people to notice that when this occurred in Biblical times, often more than one opinion is expressed by the faith communities and it is reflected in the biblical text. We see that the attitudes toward outsiders expressed in Ezra and Nehemiah were not shared by all biblical authorities. Ruth says that there is another option. So, instead of seeing who to exclude, Jesus and often other parts of the Bible remind us to see how God is at work through and in people we have often been told are unacceptable.

Just let that thought sink in for a few moments. Think of who are the people from Moab or Samaria for you. These would be people society or the church has deemed, "unacceptable." The story of Ruth says that God is at work in these people and even more, that sometimes God figures out ways to bless us because of them!

*God's blessings are for all.* The last thing I want to lift up from today's readings is the story of blessing that happens between Naomi and her daughters-in-law at the border. The discussion is an attempt by Naomi to bless and thank these two women for their kindness. She wants them to return and find new husbands, for a widow's life is very insecure. She declares the Lord will deal kindly with them. It is not a wish but a statement of faith. The term "kindly" is a feeble attempt to translate the Hebrew word "hesed." Hesed has far more theological significance than kindness. Hesed is considered an essential part of the nature of God and is frequently used to describe God's acts of unmerited grace and mercy. She is saying that they have been kind and loyal to her and their husbands beyond the call of duty, and now she says she expects the Lord to show hesed towards them. In that culture it would mean security with a new husband.

This would have been a shocking thing for the people listening to hear. God's hesed was to be poured out on the people of Israel. They thought that gift was for them alone. They were God's chosen. They were the ones to which God extends mercy and grace. To hear that a Moabite should receive hesed would have been bad enough. To

hear that it was expected that God would do this because the person was worthy of receiving it because of how kind they had been, would have been almost too much to hear. How could a hated Moabite be worthy? Remember, if they married an Israelite through 10 generations they would be tainted by this blood and considered an outsider! Think about your genealogy back ten generations, if you can go back that far. Let's assume you have an ancestor who lived in an area that is now on the State Department's list of places where suspected terrorists live. How would you like that ancestor's bloodline to keep you from becoming a citizen of the United States, or cause you to be on a terrorist watch list because you were still seen to be an unaccepted foreigner? This helps you to understand the antipathy towards Moabites.

Yet Naomi blesses Ruth and Orpah and says God will do the same. They deserved hesed because they had given it. We will talk about their response next week. I want to leave us at the border with you pondering, "Who would it be hard for me to ask God to bless?" or "Who have I considered to be outside of God's grace and mercy?"

We are going to find that God answers Naomi's request and amazing things happen. Not only will these two women be blessed by God but all of Israel will experience the results of Ruth being blessed by God.